

Moderate and Evangelical Thinking in the later Eighteenth Century: Differences and Shared Attitudes

REV. FRIEDHELM VOGES, M.TH., DR. THEOL.

The title of this article is likely to raise a few eyebrows. The common view of the eighteenth century in the Church of Scotland emphasizes the differences, but does not leave much room for shared attitudes between Moderates and Evangelicals. Little attention has been given to the fact that the churchmen of the time were not only children of the same age, but also shared a common background: they all had a presbyterian upbringing, and their intellectual habits were formed by the same academic teachers. It is quite obvious that this must have been the case, and to an outsider to Scottish affairs, the common ground between the parties seems considerable. Why, then, do so many Scottish observers have a different point of view? One tentative suggestion may be ventured: the struggle between Moderates and Evangelicals was, of course, a leading feature of the nineteenth century as well, even if after 1843 the talk was of Free Church versus Establishment. The enmity diminished, but both traditions stayed alive and vigorous well into the present century. Indeed one could ask to what extent the memories of that division still linger on. Now if this really was an underlying factor in people's attitudes, it would help to explain why the differences between the parties are usually stressed so much; but, of course, this would only be one factor among several.

To focus on the Moderate-Evangelical split is to focus on what happened within the church. The general trend of events in eighteenth-century society can then become a secondary concern all too easily. But that would not do justice to the churchmen on either side. In their different ways, people in both parties reacted to the developments of their age — to the changing modes of thought that the enlightenment produced as well as to the changing patterns of social life. What ought to be asked, however, is whether that reaction was really adequate. Did the church of the age perhaps miss opportunities to communicate the gospel, because people were either afraid or at least reluctant to move forward? Were people too entrenched in their mental and especially in their theological habits? Did the structures of the church allow enough freedom to find up-to-date ways of expressing the Christian message?

Most historians would probably agree that there is good reason to ask these questions. All over Europe, the eighteenth century was a difficult period for the Christian church, which found itself mostly on the defensive. Scotland was no exception.

This paper proposes to look at the theological thinking and some social attitudes in both parties. That would be difficult, however, without making reference to the field of church politics, where the terms “Moderate” and “Evangelical” were also used. First of all, then, it seems necessary to try to make some distinction between the different meanings of these terms. The next step is to consider how the parties differed. The final and longest part will deal with some attitudes that were shared. Throughout this article, the underlying question is how the Church of Scotland in the late eighteenth century dealt with the challenges of the age.¹

There are two distinct, but related, meanings to the terms “Evangelical” and “Moderate”. In one sense, the two are easy to distinguish: for or against patronage. The other sense has to do with the way people thought, and in this area, the distinctions are less clear and, moreover, changing. With reference to patronage, the two terms are used as late as the Ten Years’ Conflict, but by that time the theological positions have developed quite a bit.

In the earlier period an “ideal Moderate” could be described as someone who valued culture and education and who also carried this valuation into the realm of theology. “The pious and virtuous man, whose mind is enlarged by the most extensive knowledge — as he must have nobler views of all the objects of piety and virtue than others, cannot fail to possess all the feelings that belong to them with greater poignancy, and perform all their acts with greater energy than can be done by the untaught and illiterate.”² It is obvious that someone with this kind of outlook would rather let patrons decide about the appointment of ministers. In Carlyle, as in many others, the two meanings of the word “Moderatism” coincide. But that is not necessarily so. People might support patronage because they were Tories and, in the Dundas era, happy to see crown patronage used to appoint mainly Tory nominees. Or they might be influenced by having a good, caring patron themselves. When “Moderatism” is mentioned in this paper, it refers not to the attitude towards patronage, but to the underlying habits of thinking.

The term “Evangelicalism” is treated in the same way. Here there is also an “ideal type”, in whom the two meanings of the word coincide. Evangelicals liked to point out that it was the gospel which contributed to make men civilised, not the other way round, and they pointed, for example, to the Christian contribution in the fight against slavery. It was “the peculiar glory of Christianity that

¹ This paper restricts itself to the established church. The term “Evangelical” can, of course, have a wider meaning that also covers the dissenting bodies, but “Moderates” only existed with the Establishment. If we attempt a look at these two, it might be permissible and even advisable to bring in that limitation.

² A. Carlyle, *The Usefulness and Necessity of a Liberal Education for Clergymen* (Edinburgh, 1793), 23.

it is adapted alike to the learned and to the unlearned''.³ In this view, every man was capable of making up his own mind on religious matters — hence the stand against patronage. But people might also be influenced against patronage by being Whigs or by other considerations. It must be borne in mind that many people are not logical in their thinking and hold views that are in themselves not very consistent. To quote one example from the nineteenth century: Thomas Chalmers, who had started as a Moderate, underwent his conversion to Evangelicalism in a theological sense in 1810. But it took him a long time after that to come round to a stand against patronage. Even his speech in the General Assembly of 1833 in support of the Veto Act still betrayed reservations. It is not, of course, anything new to distinguish between the two meanings of Moderatism and Evangelicalism,⁴ but the distinction is far from being universally observed. One should not overemphasize it, but when the question of how people thought is addressed, church politics can perhaps, after this introduction, stay in the background.

The difference between the two parties is mostly one of mood or sentiment, as has often been observed. From a German background, it is tempting to compare the spirit of the Moderate party with that of *Kulturprotestantismus* at the turn of the present century. The common denominator seems to be that for a long time both were held in low regard, whereas today we begin to appreciate that at least they had a genuine theological impetus in trying to reach out to the "cultured classes" of their time. In some of their exponents, both movements also went quite far in accommodating the Christian message to the taste of the times, which among the Moderates would particularly apply to the second, post-Robertson generation. But authors like Ian Clark, and Andrew Drummond and James Bulloch have shown that there is not a case for outright condemnation.

Many Moderate ministers were assiduous workers in their parishes. Even Thomas Chalmers in his Kilmany period, for all his lecturing in St Andrews, went on a round of parish visitations during the university vacations. Most others were present in their congregations throughout the year and made their visits in a more satisfactory way.⁵

³ John Erskine of Greyfriars, Edinburgh, in the Assembly debate of 1796 on foreign missions, in R. Heron, *Account of the Proceedings and Debate in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 27 May 1796* (Edinburgh, 1796), 34.

⁴ See for instance A. Milroy, *The Doctrine of the Church* in R. Story (ed.), *The Church of Scotland Past and Present* (London s. a.), iv., 277; D. F. Rice, *The Theology of Thomas Chalmers* (Drew University dissertation, 1966), 7.

⁵ Note the example of James Finlayson, who reintroduced parish visitations at Borthwick, J. Finlayson, *Sermons, to which is Prefixed an Account of the Life and Character of the Author* (Edinburgh, 1809), xxi.

At this point, however, a question arises that by its very nature cannot be solved: what went on during those visitations? Or, putting it in a different way: was it visitation in the old, formal sense or perhaps just visiting? The less structured a pastoral visit, the more important the minister's personality become — with all his preferences and limitations. In that case, a Moderate minister might have been more keen to stress morality rather than doctrine. But this is not known, and it must be borne in mind that few Moderates deviated *expressis verbis* from standard theology. One comes back to the difference being that of mood or sentiment.

The initial impetus of Moderate thinking was probably a very positive one. They wanted to be Christians and at the same time children of their own age instead of people who lived in the past. And they should not be blamed too much, if they did not see what all over Europe a majority of educated people failed to see: that the spirit of the age did indeed have a place for theism, but hardly in a fully Christian sense. Where the Scottish Moderates differ from enlightenment theologians elsewhere is in their close association with the Common Sense philosophy. Most of the leading Common Sense figures had begun their career as Church of Scotland ministers, so the relationship was quite naturally a close one.

The Common Sense philosophy was really a defensive operation on the part of theism: By and large, man could trust in the evidence of his natural senses, because they were God-given faculties; and God had also made man capable of judging what was right and wrong, Reid and his followers insisted. They only had to make one qualification: "the most obvious truths are not perceived without some ripening of judgment", as Thomas Reid himself put it.⁶ The question is then: by what standard does one know what constitutes a ripe judgment? Reid and his followers found such a standard in the values held by the educated classes, and of course many of these values had a strong Christian background. But men needed to be instructed in these values; education was essential. The Moderates only carried this principle over into theology. The educated mind was now regarded as important in religious matters, too.

Both this theology and this philosophy could only gain wide acceptance as long as there was a generally agreed set of values. Indeed, the Scottish way of teaching moral philosophy, which was dominated by Common Sense thinking for a long time, did its best to formulate such a set of values and to impress it on people's minds. For a while, the Moderate attempt to reach out to the educated classes might have been quite successful. And even the general populace received some attention in this approach: many Moderates hoped that the "lower orders" would follow the

⁶ T. Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 1768), 380.

example set by their “betters”. But society was changing. The “Augustan age” came to an end, the industrial revolution produced its own values or had at least begun to do so by the turn of the century. At the same time, Moderate thinking went into decline. There is a small, but characteristic difference when one looks at John Inglis, one of the last major exponents of classical Moderate thought. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, he still proclaimed: “A man of an understanding mind, habituated to thought and reflection, has an advantage over others for estimating . . . the evidence of the Christian doctrine”.⁷ But he kept pointing to the other possibility now: that God may enlighten a man’s heart by other means. He added a supranaturalist proviso to his general Moderate theory and thus implicitly acknowledged its limitations.⁸

During its heyday, the Moderate approach must have had its strengths — mainly through enabling the Moderates to meet their counterparts in an accepting way, without the need to be judgmental on all kinds of harmless human activity like the theatre. At the same time, their perspective was pervaded by the general optimism of the age, and they must have found it difficult to be critical — or indeed judgmental — of human nature where that would have been appropriate.

On the Evangelical side, the picture seems rather less clear. It is not possible to point to any new departure which Evangelicals might have used as their point of reference. Neither does their attitude to tradition seem all that uniform. It seems safe to say that right across their different shades of opinion they shared the conviction that the gospel needed to be stated strongly and that one should beware of accommodating it to the spirit of the time. It would usually be easy to know what an Evangelical stood for, but he might find it a little more difficult to communicate to minds tired of the traditional vocabulary.

Some Evangelicals were no doubt simply conservatives whose thinking remained firmly rooted in the past. Consider, for example, this statement from John Colquhoun’s “Catechism for the Instruction and Direction of Young Communicants”: in question 3, he asks, why God is called a Spirit, and this is the answer: “Because he is essentially and necessarily a living and intelligent substance; and because he is invisible, incorruptible and immortal”.⁹ This makes no discernible allowance for the tender age of the readership addressed; and also detectable in statements like

⁷ J. Inglis, *The Grounds of Christian Hope in the Universal Prevalence of the Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1818), 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, 22.

⁹ J. Colquhoun, *A Catechism for the Instruction and Direction of Young Communicants, to which is added a Compendious View of the Baptismal Profession and Engagement*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh, 1824), unpaginated.

this is an underlying conviction that the church has a right to command people's attention, instead of a duty to win it. Such thinking would seem rooted in the covenant era, and it was losing its appeal fast. Among Evangelicals, too, there was a growing recognition that that age was over, and there was a renewed urgency to the preaching of men like John Erskine, Andrew Hunter or Nicholas Sloan. The vocabulary remained largely traditional — more about that later — but there were two distinctive features about the tone in which these men talked. One has already been mentioned: they did not value education to quite the same extent, at least in religious matters. The gospel addressed itself to the learned and the unlearned alike. A generation later, Thomas Chalmers would almost turn the old Moderate preference for education on its head, when he remarked more than once that there was many a ploughman in Scotland who had a better understanding of the gospel than the critics and theologians of Germany. The Evangelicals of the eighteenth century probably would not have made quite such extravagant claims, but their opposition to the Moderate approach is obvious.

The other difference also has to do with attitudes and not with *expressis verbis* theology. If educating the mind is a help in understanding Christianity, one is obviously dealing with a rationalist approach. Not that feeling was shunned by the Moderates, but they believed in keeping it under control. The Evangelicals, for their part, were far from being the highflyers or enthusiasts they were supposed to be. Perhaps such criticism was more directed against their cousins — distant cousins in some cases — in the dissenting churches. Within the Establishment, about the highest praise that could be lavished on a person was if he were “a zealous Christian without enthusiasm”.¹⁰ When Alexander Stewart described the revival that had occurred in his highland parish, he emphasised “the quiet, gradual manner”, in which everything had taken place.¹¹

But at the same time, religion was seen as a matter of the heart. The gospel's “chief point is, not merely to be *informed*, but also to be *saved*”, as W. L. Brown put it.¹² The Evangelicals insisted on “personal religion”, which is a frequent term in Evangelical ordination sermons; and they insisted on it rather more than the Moderates did. The criticism of Alexander Stewart's biographer was that “the almost total silence which is sometimes maintained in divinity lectures, on what is denominated ‘experience’, is not likely to operate beneficially on the minds of theological students. . . . A

¹⁰ B. Johnston, *Sermons* (Edinburgh, 1807), 462.

¹¹ A. Stewart, *Account of a late Revival of Religion in a Part of the Highlands of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1800), 25.

¹² W. L. Brown, *Sermons* (Edinburgh and London, 1803), 7; see also W. Buchanan, *The Beneficial Influence of the Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1804), 22.

defect exists, for which no adequate compensation is made by theoretic knowledge, or by the speculative orthodoxy of a systematic creed".¹³ This point may be linked with another quotation from W. L. Brown, in which he claims to give "a summary of the principal articles of the Christian faith". But that is not really what he provides here. Instead he talks about the feelings that each of these articles is supposed to evoke in heart and mind: "Sincere repentance, application for mercy through the Son of God, our appointed Saviour and mediator; the unrivalled love of our heavenly Father; a regard for our neighbour, such as we entertain for ourselves; reliance on divine aid, promised to all who ask it with sincerity, to enable us to perform our duty".¹⁴ To reach man through his heart — that could thus be said to be the main thrust of the Evangelicals' thinking. To what extent they were successful with their approach is another question. Theirs was an honest endeavour, but they did not yet have a Thomson or a Chalmers in their ranks; and they were hampered by the limitations which Scottish theology imposed on itself. They did not hide their light under a bushel, but neither did they make the candlestick for the light quite high enough. That, however, applies also to the Moderates; and the attitudes and theological conventions that both sides shared can now be examined.

There appears to have been considerable common ground under the following four headings: 1. apologetics or, in the term used at the time, the "evidences" for Christianity; 2. exegesis; 3. dogmatic theology as such; and 4. views on politics and the relationship of church and state. One is not making a special point of the practical aspects of church life, which both parties shared and which must have helped to give them a common identity as people of the Church of Scotland rather than as Moderates and Evangelicals against one another. When it came to dealing with the dissenters or — in financial matters — with political bodies, the theological differences did not matter too much. Only one practical point must be mentioned, for it had an equal influence on the thinking habits of both sides: the fact that every Scottish student at the time came under the influence of the Common Sense school through his attendance at moral philosophy lectures. This could well be one of the reasons why after the turn of the century party differences became less and less important.¹⁵ Old style Moderatism

¹³ J. Sievwright, *Memoirs of the late Rev. Alexander Stewart*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh, 1822), 18n.

¹⁴ W. L. Brown, *Sermons*, 61.

¹⁵ G. Cook, *Life of the late George Hill, D.D., Principal of St Mary's College, St Andrews* (Edinburgh, 1820), 209f; Sir H. Moncrieff Wellwood, *Account of the Life and Writings of John Erskine, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1818), 474. In Cook and Moncrieff, both party leaders agree that there is now little difference between both sides.

was on the decline, whereas Evangelicalism took on certain features of the old Moderate school.

First of all, then, the “Evidences”, which are probably the strangest flower of the theology of that time. That people wanted to defend Christianity is only natural. From about the middle of the century, deism was making itself felt in Scotland, and, of course, David Hume added his sceptical voice. But the first oponent was deism, which was an import from England, and that also applies to the way the Scots phrased their reply. To an amazing extent they followed the lead given by John Locke in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Here is his main line of argument: “To know that any revelation is from God, it is necessary to know that the messenger that delivers it is sent from God, and that cannot be known but by some credential given him by God himself. Let us see then, whether miracles . . . be not such credentials and will not infallibly direct us right in the search of divine revelation”.¹⁶ The heathen religions claimed miracles too, but these did not count, because “no mission can be looked on to be divine that delivers anything derogating from the honour of the one, only, true invisible God . . . and the rules of morality”.¹⁷

The biblical miracles and, to a lesser extent, biblical prophecy became the main arguments in the many evidence volumes that were now produced in Scotland. These were called the “external Evidences”, whereas the “internal Evidences” arguing from the intrinsic worth of Christianity were for the moment much less popular. For a while, it had looked, of course, as if this line of argument might become difficult: David Hume had denied the possibility of miracles, and for a moment, the theologians were stunned. Then George Campbell of Marischal College, Aberdeen produced what came to be known as his “celebrated argument” based on testimony, and the church thought it could breathe again. Campbell maintained that even if our experience did now know of any miracles, one always had to allow “the testimony of one ocular witness, a man of probity, in a case of which he is allow’d to be a competent judge”.¹⁸ The Bible of course had many such witnesses, and therefore miracles were safe again. “There lies the strongest presumption in favour of the testimony, till properly refuted by experience.”¹⁹ In the case of the Bible, such a refutation seemed impossible. It is positively amazing how popular and durable this line of argument became. Here is a prominent Evangelical voice, that of Sir Henry Moncrieff Wellwood: “If it were to be supposed that the general doctrine which asserts the existence of miracles is

¹⁶ J. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I. Ramsay (London, 1958), 80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁸ G. Campbell, *A Dissertation on Miracles* (Edinburgh, 1762), 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

incredible or uncertain . . . this would be in truth to suppose that the whole history of Christianity is false or is questionable".²⁰ His Moderate counterpart, George Hill, gave this description of the controversy between Hume and Campbell: "Mr Hume boasted of his reasoning as unanswerable, and he holds it forth in his Essay on Miracles as an everlasting check to superstition. The principles upon which the reasoning proceeds have been closely sifted and their fallacy completely exposed in Campbell's *Dissertation on Miracles*; one of the best polemical Treatises that ever was written. Mr Hume meets here with an antagonist, who is not inferior to himself in acuteness, and who, supported by the goodness of his cause, has gained a triumphant victory".²¹

The number of books and tracts written in this vein is innumerable. For quite a while, they did find a readership. But the modern observer cannot help noticing the stagnation in this field. The arguments hardly changed at all, and one has to ask which opponents men like Daniel Dewar and Stevenson MacGill had in mind when they published this kind of "Evidences" as late as the 1840s and 50s. Could they really hope to reach the sceptics of their own day? Or was this an exercise in fortifying a bastion that was no longer really under siege?

By 1800, the situation was perhaps different, but even then the main arguments appear rather repetitive and monotonous. Two quotations from the Aberdeen professor, Alexander Gerard, can illustrate this. He published a first book on the "Evidences" in 1766 and said even then: "It will be difficult to name a subject that has oftener been canvassed".²² He must have had England in mind with this remark. In Scotland not that many evidence volumes had been published yet. In 1828, Alexander Gerard again figures as author of a volume on "Evidences". By this time, he had been dead for over thirty years, and so had his son Gilbert, who had succeeded him to his chair in Aberdeen. Now Gilbert's son was publishing manuscripts of his father and grandfather under the title *A Compendious View of the Evidences of Natural and Revealed Religion*. The text gives no indication as to what was written by father or by grandfather. The oldest parts of it may well have been about sixty years old. It would be interesting to know how many copies were sold. That such a thing was contemplated at all shows how stagnant that branch of Scottish theology was.

A shift of emphasis towards the so called "internal evidences" only occurred after a lead had again been given from England; and then it was in dissenting circles that the relevant writings were first

²⁰ Sir H. Moncreiff Wellwood, *Discourses on the Evidences of the Jewish and Christian Revelations* (Edinburgh, 1815), 368f.

²¹ G. Hill, *Lectures in Divinity*, 4th edn. (Edinburgh and London, 1837), i. 43.

²² G. Gerard, *Dissertations on Subjects relating to the Genius and Evidence of Christianity* (Edinburgh, 1766), xvi.

published.²³ The first Scottish author, for whom the “internal evidences” were more than a side issue to be dutifully treated in a short chapter, was Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, and he was a layman of episcopalian upbringing.

The second area where Evangelicals and Moderates were basically at one is their attitude to exegesis. After seeing how the biblical miracles were held in such high regard, it comes as no surprise to find that there was no attempt at anything that could be called “critical exegesis”. There were three notable exegetes in James Macknight, George Campbell and Gilbert Gerard, who carried their research to a certain point and were then afraid to draw the obvious conclusions. Gerard, for example, declares the authorship of the pentateuch unresolved, but then he goes on to talk about Moses as their author after all.²⁴ Macknight openly talks about contradictions in the Bible, but he is ready to harmonize them rather too quickly. “It will be found that that these seemingly inconsistent texts speak of persons and things, of whose existence we are not able to judge. So that the things said concerning them in the scripture, which appear inconsistent, may all be true, though we are not able to reconcile them with each other.”²⁵ Macknight also sees quite clearly that Paul occupies a special place in New Testament theology. “The other apostles . . . have not entered so deep into the Christian scheme as he hath done; yet, in what they have written, being guided by the same spirit which inspired him, their declarations and decisions, so far as they go, are of equal authority with his.”²⁶ Without being disparaging about Macknight’s piety that comes out in such statements, it is nonetheless a timid piety and does not use the space for critical interpretation which the reformers had cleared. They had judged biblical authors by how they proclaimed Christ. Macknight and his fellow exegetes allow themselves to be hampered by their theory of inspiration. Inspiration is seen to take place in three degrees. George Hill expressed the prevalent view in this way: God “may superintend the minds of those who write, so as to prevent the possibility of error in their writings. This is the lowest degree of inspiration. He may enlarge their understandings and elevate their conceptions beyond the measure of ordinary men. This is a second degree. Or he may suggest to them the thoughts which they shall express, and the words which they shall employ, so as to render

²³ The Congregationalist “Society for Publishing Religious Tracts” had a pamphlet printed: *The Evidences of the Christian Religion briefly stated* (Edinburgh, 1796), the second half of which utilised material by Isaac Watts. For the “internal” argument, see 13 f., 18.

²⁴ G. Gerard, *Institutes of Biblical Criticism*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh, 1808), 413, 30.

²⁵ J. Macknight, *A New and Literal Translation from the Original Greek, of all the Apostolical Epistles, with a Commentary and Notes Philological, Critical, Explanatory and Practical*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1795), i. 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

them merely the vehicles of conveying his will to others. This is the highest degree of inspiration".²⁷

Such a view, of course, made for a very conservative approach to the biblical texts, even though it was not fundamentalism, which was only introduced to Scotland by the Haldanes. But the general atmosphere was conservative enough, as George Campbell discovered, when he published a new translation of the gospels. Even one of his main critics, the Evangelical William Thomson from Ayrshire ran into trouble, when he produced a translation for which he had quite intentionally used the same Greek text that had been available to the translators of the King James Bible.²⁸ The Moderates may have been marginally the more enterprising party in this respect. Campbell, Gerard and Macknight came from their ranks. But they were exceptions, and even their work was far from giving Scottish theology a much needed new impetus.

This leads on to the subject of dogmatic theology as such, and the word "dogmatic" is used advisedly, for it is hardly biblical theology that is encountered. A first pointer lies in the fact that the vast majority of sermons — and there were few other theological writings — took a single verse for their text.²⁹ In the next century, Andrew Thomson went so far as to preach his nine *Sermons on Infidelity* on the one verse Hebrews, 3: 12.³⁰ Usually, the text only supplied a word or a phrase that the preacher could latch on to and then expound his system; and this system was more or less the same with most preachers from either party. Hugh Watt has coined the term "transactionism",³¹ and that seems an apt description. The gospel was represented as a "scheme of salvation", a "divine ordinance". Terms like "gospel dispensation" or "divine economy" also occur very frequently. They are all essentially static terms, they depict Christianity as a doctrinal edifice, whereas Christ and his life are hardly mentioned. But in the gospels, one is dealing with stories, and stories do not fit so easily into categories. The most important parts of the gospel were its law, its doctrines and its positive institutions, as John Drysdale put it.³² It is then not surprising that even among the single verses that preachers used for

²⁷ G. Hill, *Lectures*, i. 189; see also A. Ranken, *Institutes of Theology* (Glasgow, 1822), 303 f.

²⁸ W. Thomson, *The New Testament Translated from the Greek, and the Four Gospels arranged in a Harmony*, 3 vols. (Kilmarnock, 1816), 2-7.

²⁹ In the period in question, we have the same picture that W. Enright found for the next two generations, see his *Preaching and Theology, in Scotland in the 19th Century*, (Edinburgh University dissertation, 1968), 240.

³⁰ A. Thomson, *Sermons on Infidelity* (Edinburgh, 1821).

³¹ H. Watt, "Robert Walker of the High Church", *ante*, xii, (1956), 89.

³² J. Drysdale, *Sermons, to which is prefixed an Account of the Author's Life and Character by Andrew Dalzel*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1793), II, 3.

their texts, there is a strong predominance of the epistles over the gospels.³³

The present contribution does not attempt to judge how far this theology was determined by the Westminster Confession. At least, it does not seem to lay much stress on the doctrine of the double decrees. But it is very concerned with keeping intact the sovereignty of God and with guarding against any notion that man could have other than a recipient part in the scheme of salvation. All activity lies with God. But while this can be a worthy theological motif, it is not put very well into practice here. It has already been seen that the full humanity of Jesus was rather overlooked. His incarnation was important, then the atonement. What he did and said played a secondary rôle. Similar treatment is accorded to man's humanity. In order to preserve God's sovereignty, the main emphasis is put on man's sinfulness. A topic like "*imitatio Christi*" would be quite alien to this kind of thinking.

Instead, God had to do everything. An atonement was necessary. God himself had to provide the perfect sacrificial lamb, and man is simply the recipient of the benefits Christ brought through his death and resurrection. Man is then of course called to show his gratitude, to believe and to do good works. But this is very much a secondary step in many sermons. When David Savile from Edinburgh preached on "Salvation only to be obtained through Christ", he laboured for twenty pages to show that man could not himself atone for his sins and how therefore Christ's sacrifice was necessary. The sermon then ends with all of eleven lines, in which the listeners are exhorted to believe.³⁴ Archibald Bonar of Cramond reminded his hearers that God "has, through the influences of his grace, begun to operate in the hearts of his chosen in the world".³⁵ Nobody would have argued with him, but it is surely surprising that he does not say a word about the human response.

One of Alexander Stewart's correspondents even went so far as to suspect that this kind of teaching "strikes at the roots of all moral virtue and must prove the ruin, not the salvation of mankind".³⁶ This charge has been levelled against the protestant way of thinking ever since the Reformation, usually from the Catholic side. It is perhaps no coincidence that it should recur at this point, this time from a non-Catholic. Nothing, of course, was further from these men's minds than to divide Christian belief from

³³ Enright, *Preaching and Theology*, 351; again there seems to be no difference between the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century.

³⁴ D. Savile, *Salvation only to be obtained through Christ* (Edinburgh, 1803).

³⁵ A. Bonar, *Sermons, Chiefly on Devotional Subjects*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1817), i., 221.

³⁶ J. Sievwright, *Memoirs*, 128.

morality, but their theology did not bring the two of them as close together as it might have done.

The weaknesses of the system itself, however, are perhaps not the main point of interest today. More important could be the fact that the system existed at all: it may have led people to think that all questions were neatly solved, and that in turn would have made it more difficult for them to listen to objections. Especially in the Moderates, this is rather surprising. They had, after all, embraced the Common Sense philosophy in order to get a genuine dialogue with their age going. They obviously found it very hard to carry this intention over into their theology. Perhaps they realised this; perhaps this is one of the reasons why some of them tended to play down the rôle of dogmatic theology in their sermons. But the barrier remained, and for the moment it remained insurmountable. They were, after all, teaching and preaching in a presbyterian system, where it was not some distant church authority but one's own presbytery that watched over people's orthodoxy, or perhaps one should say: it watched over what was thought of as orthodoxy. The few Moderates who did attempt new ways of expressing the gospel were challenged in their presbyteries, and the same happened later to the Evangelicals, McLeod Campbell and Alexander Scott. Caution was thus a necessary virtue, but it may not have been the only reason why the transactionist system proved so resilient. It probably commended itself to people because they thought this was the proper Calvinist way. It also had the practical advantage of providing a ready framework for one's sermons. Most ministers, after all, had to preach two each Sunday, and long ones at that.

Whatever the reasons may have been, Scottish theology of the time proves to be stagnant in this respect also. It is no wonder that ministers complained about growing indifference among parts of their flock.

The fourth and last point centres on the attitude of the churchmen to the state and to politics. Again, the prevalent mode of thinking is found to be firmly rooted in the past. But so was nearly everyone else's. The kirk was firmly committed to the Revolution settlement of 1688-90, and that was still an adequate position to defend. The practical political set-up had its shortcomings, and the churchmen were aware of them, even if not always sufficiently. But the general constitutional theory of checks and balances remained valid. In this respect, there is a difference vis-a-vis the first three points, where the churchmen either gradually lost touch with the thinking in at least parts of their public or where — like in the exegetical field — they failed to take account of international developments.

When we talk of politics in this period, our first thought is probably of the French Revolution and all the panic and hysteria it

created in Scotland.³⁷ Even the innocent proposal of a collection for foreign missions was now suspect, because it came from the newly formed missionary societies and not from some established authority. The reaction of at least some church people is rather questionable here, though it must be said that, being good presbyterians, they still knew that there was a limit to what government could do. When Henry Dundas expected ministers to appeal for donations for the war against France, the Moderate leader George Hill firmly resisted,³⁸ and the suggestion seems to have gone no further.

Yet the French Revolution with all its excitement can easily distort the picture. For a more balanced view, one might turn to two sermons preached at the centenary of the Revolution settlement of 1688. The authors both come from Ayrshire, but they could not be more different. William MacGill was an arch-Moderate. He had been in difficulty over his *Practical Essay on the Death of Christ*,³⁹ one of the few attempts to carry Moderate thinking into dogmatic theology. Among his opponents, quite a notable voice had been that of William Peebles, a prominent Evangelical. Peebles' centenary sermon is called *The Great Things which the Lord hath done for this Nation*,⁴⁰ whereas MacGill preached on *The Benefits of the Revolution*.⁴¹ It is fascinating to notice the similarities between these two dissimilar men. Both start by depicting the evils of the Stewart era, then they go on to praise the fruits of the Revolution settlement. Only in the third part is there a difference, when it comes to a practical evaluation of their own time. A few examples many suffice: "We became . . . the subjects of a legal and limited, as well as a hereditary monarchy, the best constitution ever devised by human wisdom. We have kings, but they are not absolute, despotic kings . . . they claim no dispensing power, no authority superior to the laws, but govern according to the will of the community, expressed by its representatives".⁴² "Liberty had extended its benign influence to all ranks; and the lowest have now the privilege of living under the protection of known, and equal laws, as well as the highest."⁴³

Thus far MacGill. Now here is Peebles: "We are the subjects of a constitution the most favourable to freedom; the most inimical to slavery; that raises the human mind far above oppression and

³⁷ H. Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Glasgow, 1912) remains a powerful account of events in that period.

³⁸ Cook, *Life of Hill*, 134; see also G. Hill, *The present Happiness of Great Britain* (Edinburgh, 1792), 21.

See A. McNair, *Scots Theology in the 18th Century* (London, 1928).

³⁹ Published Kilmarnock, 1788.

⁴⁰ Published Kilmarnock, 1789.

⁴¹ MacGill, *The Benefits of the Revolution*, 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 13.

tyranny . . . and excites to industry, commerce, and every art friendly to the happiness and peace of society".⁴⁴ "We have only to appeal to facts and experience — to the experience of us all who have participated of the sweets of civil liberty; and so long as we act and behave as the proper subjects of a free government, we can brave with safety the insults of every oppressor."⁴⁵ Perhaps Peebles lays a bit more stress on the *religious* freedom guaranteed by the Revolution settlement, but then his sermon is also much longer. Otherwise, they agree on almost everything. The only difference comes predictably in their attitude to patronage, which Peebles sees as an evil, while MacGill defends it. But thereafter they are both at one again and urge their hearers to show their gratitude to God by being good subjects and good Christians. Other ministers preached in very similar terms⁴⁶, but given the space available here, this example will have to suffice.

Freedom protected by a system of checks and balances — that was a main concern for the churchmen. In the way they put their arguments, they were influenced by Adam Ferguson, another former Church of Scotland minister, whose *Essay on the History of Civil Society* went through seven editions from 1767 to 1814 and whose teachings would also have figured in the moral philosophy courses. But the concern for freedom probably has other origins too. "They are all Presbyterians and Calvinists, and so, in spite of themselves and others, they are and must be Whigs. A few, indeed, may endeavour to persuade themselves and others that they are Tories, but they wear the cloak of Geneva, and they are the descendants of John Knox — and that is sufficient." That is how J. G. Lockhart puts it in his satirical *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk*.⁴⁷ He points to the probable root of this thinking in the Calvinist tradition and the history of the Scottish Reformation.

On the basis of this constitutional theory, the Church of Scotland was theoretically able to accommodate most new developments. A system of checks and balances is capable of improvement. Speaking theologically, the descendants of John Knox should have known that human society never approximates sufficiently to the will of God. They probably did know it too, but they did not put their knowledge into practice very convincingly. Very often, they speak in the language of *beati possidentes*, who do not like their peace to be disturbed. Ferguson had told them that the British constitution "has carried the authority and government of law to a

⁴⁴ Peebles, *Great Things*, 24f.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25f.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, A. Ranken, *A Discourse on the Advantages of the Revolution 1688* (Glasgow, 1788), J. Robertson, *Britain the chosen Nation* (Kilmarnock, 1788).

⁴⁷ J. G. Lockhart, *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk*, 3 vols. 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 1819), i. 80.

point of perfection",⁴⁸ and this sentiment is echoed by many ministers. George Hill speaks for many: "A government more perfect than ours never has in fact existed: we enjoy at present the best that is known".⁴⁹ Religion then becomes "the cement of civil society" — a favourite term of the times⁵⁰ and we are faced with an essentially static view of things. The critical potential of the theory was perhaps not lost, but certainly neglected. In view of the challenge from France, that is perhaps even understandable. But it means that the kirk was not as well equipped as it might have been to meet the changes which were now beginning to come through industrialisation. After a century of relative stability, new developments were springing upon society, including the church. It is hard to see how the churchmen could have done better, but they were not in a good position to deal with the new challenges. For the moment they remained content to look on. In the nineteenth century, the most energetic programme of social re-orientation was that of Thomas Chalmers, and it is hardly a coincidence that his social ideal was essentially backward-looking.

At the beginning of the French Revolution, there had even been a few sympathisers, who hoped that France might get a government like Britain. When events in France took a more radical turn, this sympathy quickly vanished. At least in print, there seems to be only one exception, the Rev. William Dunn of Kirkintilloch, who preached to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr and chose as his text: "Behold I make all things new". But it is a very facile way in which he sees that pronouncement coming true in the revolution.⁵¹ Otherwise most people seem to have panicked and that helped to strengthen a tendency, which was present anyway: a happy acquiescence with things as they were.

Perhaps it is now clearer that what Moderates and Evangelicals had in common outweighed the impact of their differences. In considering the long term effects, what counts most is how poorly the Church of Scotland was equipped to face the challenges of the age. The picture painted might appear rather too bleak. Of course, there were individual ministers who overcame

⁴⁸ A. Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 7th edn. (Edinburgh, 1814), 278.

⁴⁹ G. Hill, *Present Happiness*, 22.

⁵⁰ See also A. Hunter, *The Duties of Subjects* (Edinburgh, 1792), 25; T. Hardy, *Fidelity to the British Constitution the Duty and Interest of the People* (Edinburgh, 1794), 43; R. Walker, *The Sentiments and Conduct becoming Britons in the Present Conjuncture* (Edinburgh, 1794), 8, 28; J. Wemyss, *A Scriptural View of Kings and Magistrates* (Edinburgh, 1794), 3f.

⁵¹ W. Dunn, *A Sermon, Preached at the Opening of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr* (Glasgow, 1792); for a contemporary reaction see the anonymous pamphlet: *Political Preaching, or Meditations of a wellmeaning Man, on a Sermon lately published, in a Letter, addressed to the Rev. Mr William Dunn, Minister of Kirkintilloch* (Glasgow, 1793).

some of the shortcomings described by their natural talent to communicate to people; and a considerable part of the public must still have been quite happy with the traditional answers and the way they were phrased. In a way, that must have made it more difficult to become aware of the changes which took place. In any case, it would seem appropriate in the twentieth century to stop arguing the merits and shortcomings of Moderatism and Evangelicalism. The party differences do have their place in history and deserve some treatment. They can, however, detract attention from the more important question of how the church of the time communicated the gospel.⁵²

⁵² The text of this article forms a summary of parts of the author's book *Das Denken von Thomas Chalmers im kirchen und sozialgeschichtlichen Kontext* (Peter Lang Verlag: Frankfurt, Bern, New York, 1984), volume 32 in the series "Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity".

